

3 John • Determining Who Is — and Not — Of God

Introduction

Just because we're tucked safely behind the doors of our church building does not mean that evil cannot touch us, and neither does it mean that every person there — even the leaders — are “of God”. In the Parable of the Tares (Matthew 13:24-40) Jesus clearly teaches that there will be false believers trying to co-exist, co-mingle with the true. How do we determine who is and is not of God, and at what point do we take action on this knowledge?

¹The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

[Read v. 1]

Q: Who is “the elder”? Who is Gaius? How is the relationship characterized between the elder and Gaius?

A: Tradition has always held that the elder here was John the apostle. The style and language of the letter are entirely consistent with the rest of John's letters. This letter was probably written around A.D. 90-95.

John uses the term “elder” to indicate his age and church leadership. Tradition holds that John moved his community of believers (which included Jesus' mother Mary) from Jerusalem to Ephesus during an outbreak of persecution against the Christians. Gaius is unknown, but being a Greek name, he was most likely a Gentile to lived in Asia Minor and had hosted and supported John on many occasions. Obviously, their relationship is very close. John calls him “beloved” (a term used only of Christians in the NT) and says, “whom I love in truth.” MacArthur observes, “Because Christians have common knowledge of the truth, they have the common source of love.”

²Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.

[Read v. 2]

Q: Those who preach the health, wealth and prosperity gospel (e.g., Frederick Price, Kenneth Copeland) use this verse as a proof text that God's desire for us is always good health and prosperity, and that it is a reasonable expectation of Christians that they should pray to receive wealth. What's wrong with that interpretation of this verse, and what other passages in Scripture teach otherwise?

A: For starters, see Matt. 6:19-21, 24; Matt. 6:25-34; 1 Tim. 6:8. The best example, however, is the lifestyle of the apostles. How did they interpret the need for wealth? The NT clearly indicates that they lived austere lifestyles and avoided riches. The proper interpretation of this verse is one of a proper greeting. We always wish for the best for our friends, and that they indeed may prosper, both physically and “in all respects.” But that's a long way from saying that these things are the right of every Christian, and an even longer way from basing a doctrine on this verse.

³For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

[Read v. 3-4]

Q: What is the thing John is so very glad for, and why is this important? (You may have to refer to 1 John for a partial answer to this question.)

A: Four times the word “truth” is used in verses 1-4. Truth is the basis for our knowledge of Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross. If truth goes, the whole system goes. Therefore, John is delighted that his good friend has not strayed from the truth in spite of the many diluting philosophies being passed around.

Application: What is the relationship between truth and love? What happens if truth is offered without love, and what happens if love is given without truth?

⁵Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; ⁶and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.

⁹I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. ¹⁰For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.

¹¹Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

¹³I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; ¹⁴but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face.

[Read v. 5-8]

Q: What is John commending Gaius for in these verses?

A: His hospitality to those who are on missionary teams or who travel from one church to the next.

Application: *In what way can the members of the church fulfill "The Gaius Mandate" of ministry? How should the church respond when missionaries come home from the field?*

[Read v. 9-10]

Q: Describe Diotrephes in regard to his attitude and his relationship to the apostle John.

A: This man is typical of many in churches who are unteachable. The really arrogant thing here is that he thinks he knows more about Christianity than the apostle John! The thing that makes him unteachable is his pride. He is probably very intelligent, articulate, powerful in the community, and may be a man of great wealth. He could be a Gentile convert that is used to being in charge. Rather than humbling himself before the church and before the apostle John, he elevates his authority based on his power over people. He is also inclined to make accusations against John. He has become so powerful that he basically controls the church, putting people out who disagree with him, and refusing to receive those sent to instruct him.

Case example: *A church staff person receives a letter from a member that is full of criticisms and accusations about his or her ministry. Almost all accusations are not based on truth, and most of it is hearsay evidence. Many accusations are "feelings" that cannot be disputed. What should the staffer do? What role is the accuser playing? (See Rev. 12:10, "Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.")*

[Read v.11-14]

Q: How does the instruction to not imitate evil relate to verse 10?

A: The relationship is this: what Diotrephes is doing, John calls evil. Therefore false accusation, lies, power plays, and rejecting the truth is evil.

Q: In verse 12 John makes the statement, "The one who does good is of God...." Does this mean that anyone and everyone who does good is of God, or by it does he mean something else?

A: There are plenty of good people in the world, but that doesn't mean they are of God. If that were the case, then salvation would be based upon works. What John is saying is that those who are truly of God will turn from evil and do good. The goodness is a result of being of God, not the other way around. The same is true of the latter half of the verse. Can a Christian do evil? Of course. But because a Christian stumbles doesn't mean he or she is not of God. John is characteristically talking about a lifestyle, a way of life, a philosophy of life. It means those who have

rejected God and turned away from Him have adopted a lifestyle that is not of God, and it's visibly evident in their actions.

Q: Do you think Diotrephes was a Christian?

A: According to verse 11, apparently John is saying that he isn't or he wouldn't be doing these evil things. He may be head of the church, but he is not of God.

Application: *Have you experienced or heard of others' experiences when the head of a church (pastor, elder, deacon) was not of God? How would you know? According to John, what are the two essential qualities for knowing if a person is of God or not? (They have the truth, and they love others as a result of the truth.)*

Q: What is the meaning of verse 12 in regard to the person of Demetrius? Who was Demetrius?

A: Demetrius is an unknown person. However, he may have been a leader in the church. He has a "good testimony" which means that his beliefs and lifestyle are in keeping with someone who is of God. The truth itself also gives testimony to Demetrius, in that his beliefs are in keeping with the truth. Note how the truth itself is able to testify. Added to that is the testimony of John and the other apostles. In summary, that Demetrius is of God is revealed by the fact that he believes and speaks correctly, and is supported by the apostles.

Application: *How do we know a person is of God in regard to their beliefs and according to what they teach?*

Application: *What are the two things we look for in determining whether or not a person is of God? (They believe correctly and they love fervently.)*